



EFFICIENCY REVIEW STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

Background

In Fall 2009, the Office of Administrative Hearings contracted with a consultant, Framework LLC, to conduct a review of the agency's operations to identify opportunities for efficiency gains, service delivery improvements, and to assess the capabilities and risks of current case management systems. Framework completed its review and issued a report in May 2010.

Methodology

Framework evaluated agency processes, practices and systems in ways that balanced efficiency, effectiveness and service quality. Its review included:

- interviews with agency management and staff,
- site visits to all five field offices to observe work processes,
- analysis of historical and current data on workload, staffing and budget,
- examination of information technology use to support business processes,
- stakeholder interviews with representatives from: ESD, DSHS, AGO, Columbia Legal Services, Unemployment Law Project, TALX UC, Seattle Univ. Law School Legal Aid Clinic.

Key Findings and Recommendations

OAH has been active in efforts to improve process efficiency, effectiveness and the overall quality of service to agency customers. Framework made 24 recommendations, based on its findings.

Strengths

- OAH employees are hard-working and mission driven
- Good working relationships with major customers
- Employees have been creative and empowered to make improvements in processes and practices
- Support staff in smaller offices who are co-located together, combined with cross-training and shared email communication, work effectively as a team to handle workload variations
- Cost per hearing is low compared to its counterparts in other states, 5th lowest cost per hearing of 24 states surveyed in 2009

Technology

- OAH uses three incompatible case tracking applications with "weak security"
- These three applications (ACTS, HATSS, CATS) are:
 - inadequate to support agency operations,
 - based on obsolete technology with no vendor support
 - **present an "unacceptable level of risk"; "Failure of one or more of the applications would effectively put OAH out of business until a replacement was implemented."**

Framework identified five options, and recommended:

- Buy a commercial off-the-shelf case management application as the best long-term solution;
- Create an interim case tracking solution using standard State of Washington tools and industry standard technologies and products. .

Other technology opportunities recommended:

- Use *Outlook* for scheduling hearings; Use *Word* for document creation
- Use *SharePoint* to share documents and files electronically state-wide
- Improve system and data security; Improve data quality

Policy, Practice & Process

In its findings Framework identified several barriers to efficient and effective case management:

- Paper-intensive processes
- Certain customer practices / policies affect OAH's ability to efficient / effective
- Limited-English speaking appellants face barriers to access to justice
- Variations in policy, processes, and procedures make customer /stakeholder interactions with OAH more difficult
- OAH is managing to timeliness standards, not necessarily to quality standards

Recommendations for high priority areas include:

- Streamline, standardize, and document processes and policies statewide
- Balance performance expectations
- Fully leverage existing office technology to support case management and communication

Workload & Staffing

OAH's caseload is dominated by its two largest customers, ESD and DSHS, accounting for 98% of total appeals. The volume of ESD appeals has increased significantly since the start of FY 2009, while the number of other customer appeals has increased gradually or remained stable.

To overcome existing barriers to OAH's' ability to be nimble and flexible in staffing to meet workload needs, Framework recommended:

- Exploring strategies to balance workload between offices
- Maximize efficiency of dockets / calendars
- Hiring additional ALJs to support the ESD Unemployment Insurance caseload

Next Steps

The agency's strategic plan will be updated to reflect the study results. They will guide future agency quality projects and budget requests for information technology. Based on Framework's findings and recommendations, OAH will seek opportunities for more collaboration with stakeholders on business process improvements, service delivery enhancements, and improved access to justice.

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